

Chao Yuen Ren (1892–1982)

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Y. R. Chao is easily the most famous linguist to have come out of China. Born before the end of the last dynasty in China, he received a traditional Confucian education, but was also one of the first Chinese people to be sent to the West for training in modern Western science (under the Boxer Indemnity Fund). The remarkable breadth and scope of his studies included physics, mathematics, linguistics, musical and literary composition, and translation, and he was a pioneer in many of these fields. Chao received a B.A. in mathematics from Cornell University in 1914, and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard in 1918, but began his career teaching physics at Cornell and Harvard. He returned to China in 1920 to take a position at Tsing Hua University; there he acted as interpreter for Bertrand Russell, Dora Black, and John Dewey. He was involved in the vernacular literature movement, in 1922 translating *Alice in Wonderland* into vernacular Chinese, and also in the national language and standardization movement. He developed the system of National Romanization that was adopted by the government and was one of the key members of the group that created the national language, with his voice being the one on the recordings of the new national and standard language. In the late 1920s, when the Academia Sinica was founded, he became the head of the linguistics section of the Institute of History and Philology. There he organized teams to go to the field to systematically record the different Chinese dialects, and published his *Studies of the modern Wu dialects*, the earliest descriptive work of its kind in China. It was also in those years that he wrote his famous article 'On the non-uniqueness of phonemic solutions of phonetic systems.' During the war years he was back in the U.S., in Hawaii, then Yale and Harvard. He was recruited to lead the U.S. Army Chinese language program at Harvard, where he wrote his *Cantonese primer* (1947) and *Concise dictionary of spoken Chinese* (1946). These publications also led to his *Mandarin primer* (1961), *Readings in sayable Chinese* (1968), and *Grammar of spoken Chinese* (1968), still the best grammar of Mandarin Chinese available. It is an amazing piece of scholarship not only for its incredible thoroughness, but also because of his

insightful inductive analysis, taking Chinese on its own terms (in fine structuralist tradition) rather than trying to force it into any preconceived categories.

In 1947 he was on his way back to China, but stopped off at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was offered a position, in which he remained until he retired in 1960, becoming Agassiz Professor of Oriental Languages and Literatures in 1952. His contributions were also recognized by his election to president of the Linguistic Society of America in 1945 and president of the American Oriental Society in 1960. Among his well-known students are Wang Li (see **Wang Li (1900–1986)**), Kun Chang (who replaced Chao at Berkeley upon his retirement), and Jerry Norman.

See also: Chinese; Phoneme; Wang Li (1900–1986).

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